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The Upper Simeto Valley Project

An interim report on the first season

Anna Leone, Robert Witcher, Francesco Privitera & Umberto Spigo

INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces a new survey project, located on the north-west flank of Etna, and presents the preliminary results of the first season of fieldwork conducted during summer 2006. The long-term aim of the project is to investigate the transformation of the human and physical landscapes of this upland area from prehistory to modern times. The project is directed jointly by the University of Durham (A. Leone & R. Witcher) and the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Catania (F. Privitera & U. Spigo).

The project research area includes the territories of the communes of Bronte, Maletto and Maniace in the Provincia di Catania (fig. 1) and focuses, in particular, on the area located in the upper valley of the river Simeto that is formed at the confluence of the Saracena, Acuto and Martello rivers. Many individual archaeological sites and features have been identified in this area in the past and some have been subject to excavation. For example, the evidence for prehistoric cave occupation has been extensively studied (see Privitera 1998). More generally, in 1926 and 1936, Benedetto Radice published two detailed synopses of discoveries to date; other brief archaeological summaries include Spigo (1985). Local historians have also contributed to the publication and discussion of more recent archaeological discoveries (Galati 1988; 2006; Nibali & Luca 1983). Despite this valuable work, overall understanding of this landscape remains fragmentary and the area is much less well known than the southern and eastern flanks of Etna (for example, see Branciforti 1999). The territory as a whole has never been subject to systematic archaeological survey and for this reason fieldwalking appeared to be a highly promising means of providing a large database of a full range of site types and material cultures across broad areas of the landscape. The preliminary season was planned to assess the suitability of the area in relation to our research questions and methods and a range of different, representative landscape types were identified and investigated.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Recent interest in Mediterranean studies towards maritime connectivity, insularity, colonialism and identity (e.g. Horden & Purcell 2000; van Dommelen 1998) make Sicily a natural focus for study. Specific themes have dominated discussion of the island's past, for example in relation to the Roman period, the rise of slave-run estates, latifundia, pastoralism and depopulation. The bulk of archaeological research has concentrated on the densely-populated coastal plains, where studies have focused on successive invasions and colonisations (attracted by the island's strategic location and economic resources). In other words, Sicily has been studied from the 'outside in', with all the associated assumptions about the island's cultural connectivity and diversity; there has been much less attention paid to inland areas. The current project therefore aims to analyse the landscape from the 'inside out'.

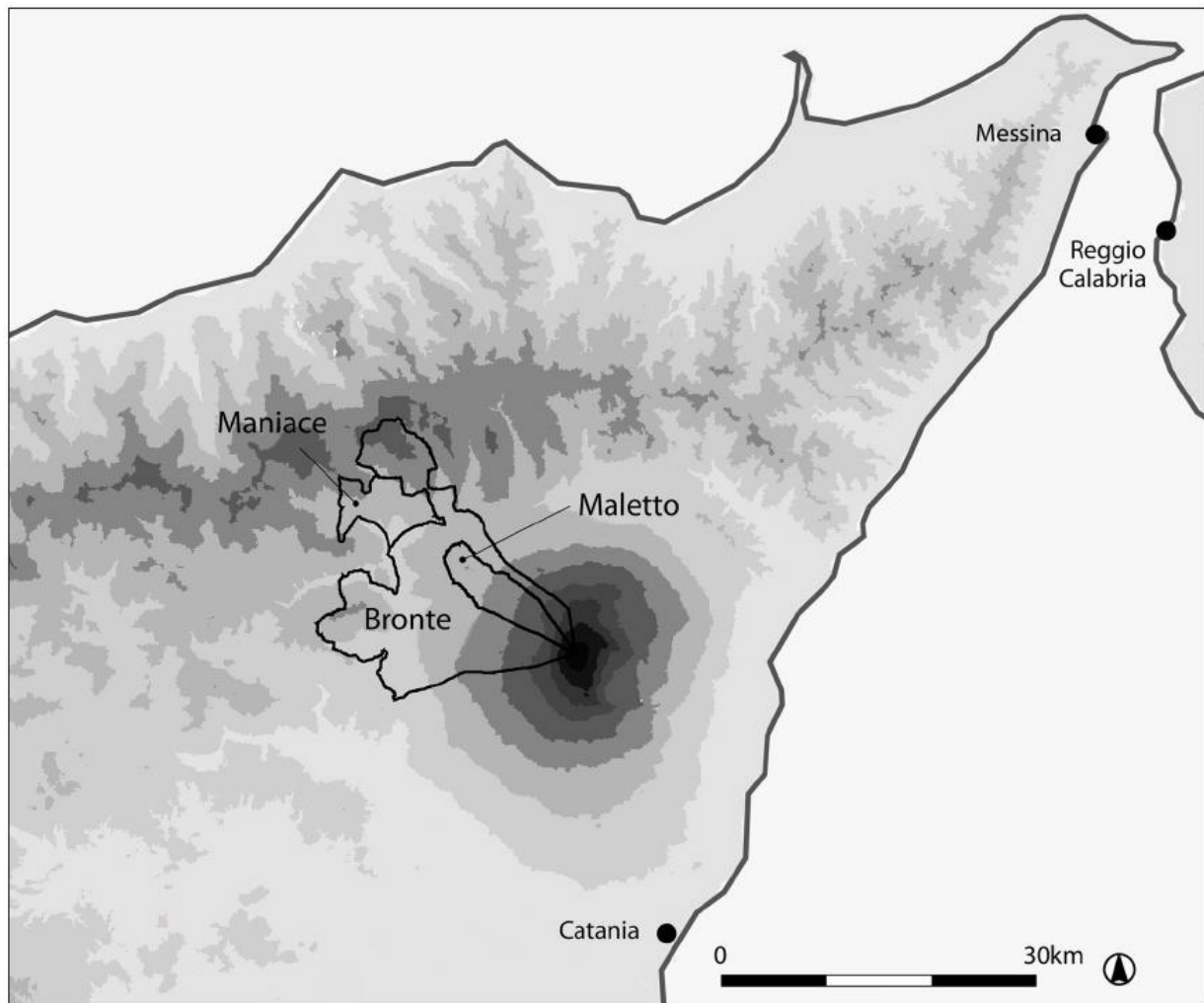


Fig. 1 Location map of the study area

In recent years, a number of fieldwalking projects have been conducted across Sicily, including several which have explored inland and upland areas of the island. The nearest field survey to the current research area is around Troina in the Nebrodi Mountains, c. 20km to the west; it is diachronic in its coverage, although it has a particular emphasis on prehistoric periods (Malone et al. 2001–3; Ashley et al. this volume; Albanese Procelli et al. this volume; Kolb et al. this volume). Sicilian surveys as a group reveal a range of broad similarities and regional/ local differences. For example, a sequence widely observed by many surveys is the dispersal of rural settlement into the countryside during the Hellenistic period at a time when many small centres were declining in significance. Broad continuity or modest expansion of rural settlement in the republican period was then followed by significant decline in numbers in the early and middle imperial periods with a nucleation of activity at a smaller number of larger agricultural centres. Settlement numbers began to grow again in late antiquity and the Byzantine period (examples include the Segesta region: Bernardini et al. 2000: 107; Himera: Belvedere 2002 et al.: 211; and Heraclea Minoa: Wilson & Leonard 1980). It is argued that this sequence reflects a series of well-known historical events and processes, such as estate agglomeration. However, much divergence from this general sequence has also been identified: very little Roman material was identified at S. Caterina Villarmosa (Vassallo 1990: 37–8), whilst settlement continuity was noted for the imperial period at Resuttano (Burgio 2002: 163) and modest early imperial growth is suggested around Monreale (Johns 1992). A generalised reading of the historical sources which argue that rural Sicily was economically and demographically depressed during the early and middle imperial periods must therefore be questioned as an over simplification (Wilson 1990: 233; 2000). More generally, historical sources which make sweeping generalisations cannot be assumed to apply across the entire island (see Wilson 1990: 194). Not least, historical sources

must be understood in context; for example, Strabo notes the depopulation of Sicily, with large areas turned over to pastoralism, however, population decline forms a topos in early imperial writing and as such his comments must be used with caution.

The longer-term ambition of the Upper Simeto Valley project is therefore to identify the key characteristics of this landscape over time in order to understand its development, both on its own terms and in its wider Sicilian and Mediterranean contexts.

First, it is necessary to investigate the character of rural settlement and the ways in which it functioned and changed over time. In the recent past, for example, settlement around Etna has been organized as 'agro-towns' with few dispersed settlements. Historically, such towns are usually associated with fragmented land ownership, but the evidence for Roman latifundia and extensive pastoralism may mean that different systems prevailed in antiquity (for risk-buffering, see Horden & Purcell 2000). In fact, although common Sicilian trends must be treated with caution, the presence of large latifundia seems to characterise the Roman imperial period (latifundia are usually represented by a large villa and a series of related farms or vici, although the size of these estates is debated). In terms of exploitation of the territory, the volcanic area has been defined as particularly rich by Strabo (V 4, 8) who also mentions the fact that the territory in this area, was principally exploited for wine production and pastoralism (VI 2, 3).

Later, at the end of the sixth century AD, Pope Gregory the Great identifies different types of settlement defined as: *ecclesiae*, *castra*, *vici* and *domus* (Belvedere 1995: 195–7). However, the definition of these new types of site does not necessarily imply a change in the number of settlements occupied on the ground. In this sense, it is interesting to note that in the Upper Simeto valley, preliminary research has identified strong continuity of settlement occupation from the Greek period until at least Medieval times (although this situation must be confirmed by future work). Emporia, often larger centres, frequently corresponding to stations of the *cursus publicus* in the Roman period suggest possible market functions (Belvedere 1995: 199 — an example would be *Philosophiana*, see below). Such sites are crucial for understanding the shifting balance between rural and urban settlements.

A second key aspect of the landscape under consideration is the nature of communications between interior and coast. It is essential to understand the degree to which inland areas were integrated with, or isolated from, the cultural developments of the coast, for example, in terms of the production and consumption of material culture, especially pottery. The presence in this area of market centres obviously required the existence of an articulated road system (Uggeri 1997–8: 300). Some routes in this area are already well-known, dating to the Greek period and continuing in use; in fact the existing road network was not significantly transformed during the Roman period (Uggeri 1997–8: 304). For example, a long-lived road from Centuripe forked at Adrano. A branch to the north probably ran from Adrano along the slope of Etna via Mendolito to Maniace-Galatese or Casitta, then turning towards the Randazzo area (the location of Imbisch-Aquafredda, an important settlement that was destroyed around the third century BC) and then towards Francavilla, Naxos and Tauromenion. The branch road from Adrano to the south-east, reached Biancavilla (Hybla? — although this is unlikely to be the correct identification since no archaeological remains have been located within the modern city and nearby remains do not appear to be particularly large), then Aitna (Inessa — the exact location has not been identified. Uggeri 2004: 249 suggests Paternò but the site has also been identified with findings in Contrada Civita between Paternò and S. Maria di Licodia or with another centre in Contrada Poirà, Paternò being identified with Hybla) and finally Catania (Uggeri 1997–8: 302; 2004: 246–7).

If the road organisation seems to have survived from the Castellucciano period to the early empire without interruption, from the late antique period (fourth century AD) new *mansiones* are recorded (Uggeri 1997–8: 310). In late antiquity, they often appear in connection with latifundia and are progressively more detached from towns (Uggeri 1997–8: 310). New routes appear in the Medieval period (Uggeri 1986), such as the one mentioned by Idrisi, connecting Taormina and Termini-Palermo, running through Randazzo, Maniace, Cesarò and Troina (Uggeri 2004: 293).

Settlement patterns, roads and material culture are crucial for understanding inland/ upland areas. Did they demonstrate greater social and economic continuity because of their 'isolation' from the coast? Or did their exploitation by external landowners such as Roman senators or the Nelson family through the Duchy of Bronte leave them vulnerable to wider economic developments? Transhumance is of particular relevance and the identification of routes which connected inland/ upland areas with the coasts will be important elements in understanding human and physical landscapes over time.

Finally, the project considers the importance of Etna and how it impacted on societies through the changing physical environment and perception of opportunity and risk. Summit eruptions pose little direct threat to settlement (the main impact for surrounding towns being ash); however, periodic flank eruptions from the many small cones which characterise Etna are more hazardous (Chester et al. 2005). Relatively, the north part of the research area (Maletto/ Maniace) is topographically protected from such flank eruptions (archaeologically, these areas are of the highest importance, as land sterilised by lava presents limited opportunities for investigation). The southern part, including the town of Bronte, is more exposed because of its location and topography (Duncan et al. 1981). Generally, the north-west slopes of Etna are relatively well-protected from volcanic activity in comparison with the southern and eastern slopes, but it is the latter, more exposed areas which are the most densely-occupied and intensively-farmed today. A key danger is the loss of agricultural land; traditional fragmented landholding has spread this risk (Chester et al. 2005; for the relationship between people and natural catastrophes, see papers in Balmuth et al. 2005 and in Kokalos 1990–1).

THE 2006 SEASON — AIMS AND METHODS

The 2006 fieldwork, funded by the British Academy, was planned as an exploratory season during which different landscapes and materials could be identified and their potential for further work established. It was important to know whether site preservation and quantity of material culture were sufficient in order to be able to answer the broader research questions.

Although the wider study area is relatively small (c. 327km²; the footprint of Etna encompasses c. 1750km²) (fig.2), it comprises enormous geological diversity, which is broadly representative of a much wider region. Significantly, it is located at the interface between the volcanic landscape created by Etna and the sedimentary limestone/ clay hills to the west. This not only provided past (and present) communities with particularly varied ecological problems and opportunities, but also creates very different archaeological signatures. With restricted time and resources, and limited advance knowledge of the nature of the archaeological record, a systematic sample was impracticable. Instead, fields were accessed as ploughing or permission of owners made them available. Work focused on three sample areas either side of the volcanic/ sedimentary interface. Whilst no more than 6km apart, these three areas demonstrate distinctive geological, land use and archaeological characteristics.

1) Valley side (Balze/ Erraneria). The first area comprises clay hill slopes extending down to, and including, the alluvium-filled valley of the Saracena river. The higher slopes are characterised by landslips, especially obvious in areas left for pasture; lower slopes have been extensively landscaped with terraces and artificial lakes for fruit trees. The discovery of a wealthy Roman villa was reported in this area by Paolo Orsi (1905; 1907).

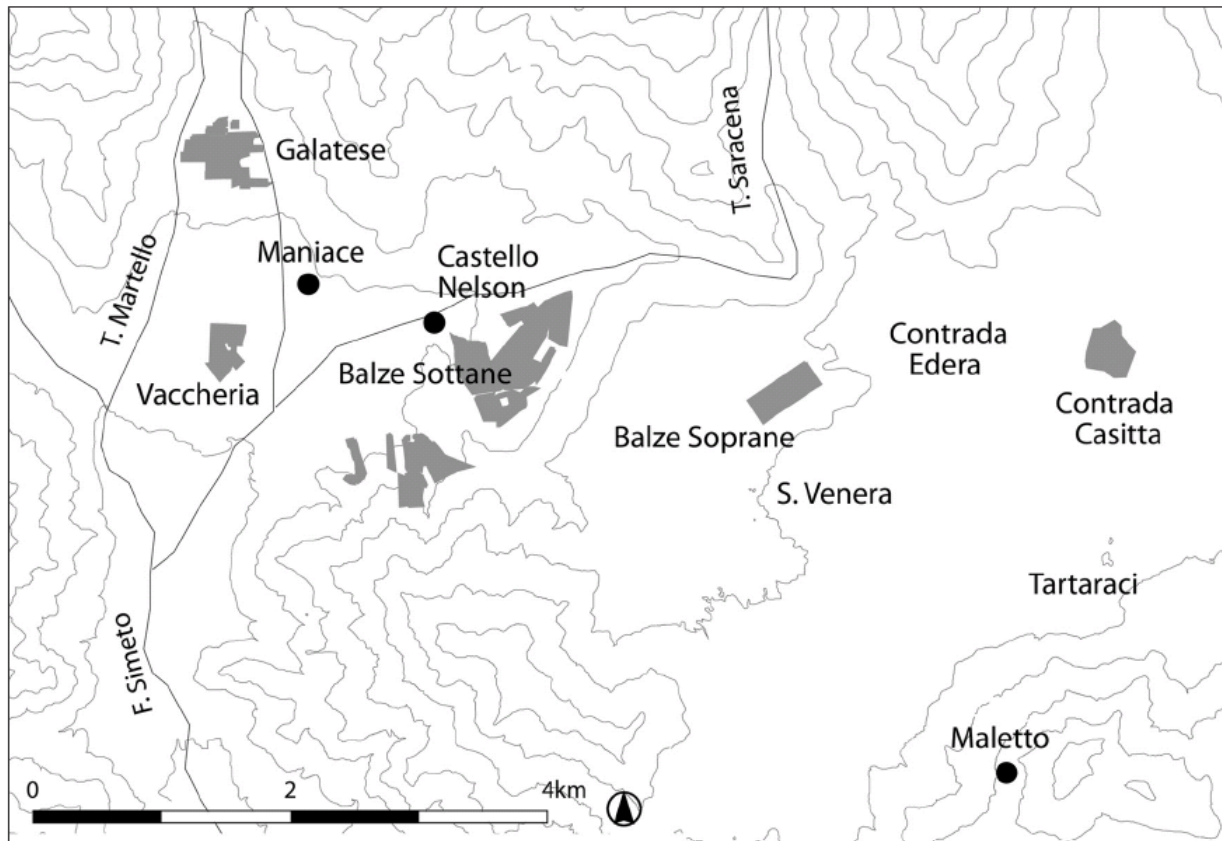


Fig. 2 Location map of areas surveyed

2) Lava flow (S. Venera/ Casitta). The prehistoric lava flow which descends to the north and west of Maletto is characterised by areas of exposed rock interspersed with small pockets of soils comprising alluvium and weathered rock. There is little variation in elevation across the flow, which forms an extensive 'plain' beneath the medieval town. However, movement is impeded by the highly irregular localised topography with cliffs and fissures of several metres in height. The exposed rock and thin soils support rough scrub vegetation which is grazed as common land within the Etna National Park. The date of the lava flow is not known, but Neolithic material has been noted. Material found at Casitta during the present survey relates to the Malpasso culture dated, following the Sicilian chronology, to the Late Copper Age (second phase). The lack of ploughing means that disturbed archaeological strata are not present, however, extensive remains of built-structures cover the area. Particular attention was devoted to the area of S. Venera, where a substantial stone wall extends over a kilometre across the flow (the structure was first identified by Dr. Tomasello and was subsequently studied by F. Privitera), and the area of Casitta to the east where tomb-robbing had brought a large site to the attention of the local authorities. On the west side of the latter settlement lies a necropolis attested by a Roman grave excavated by A. Consoli. An askos in the shape of a duck probably comes from another grave in this area (Privitera pers. comm.)

3) River terrace (Galatese and Vaccheria). The third area, Galatese, lies on a wide, flat river terrace near Maniace. The area is mainly devoted to fruit trees and pasture, though proximity to the village means that development is encroaching across the terrace. Recent building work had uncovered a late antique funerary area and interpretation of historical sources suggests the existence of a significant settlement site in the area.

Fields were covered at 5m walker spacing, a higher level of intensity than the nearby Troina survey's 10m (Ayala & French 2005: 152) and Himera's 3–25m, depending on visibility (Belvedere 2002: 8). This was intended to recover as large a sample of material as possible and to allow for the identification of extremely small scatters. All material, including tile, was collected and removed

for further study. The basic unit of record was the field. A hand-held GPS was used to map the boundaries of fields; where a concentration of material was discovered, its limits were identified and mapped with the GPS. On the lava flow within the Etna National Park, there are no field boundaries, and arbitrary grids were walked where possible, though the method was adapted in response to the irregularity of the terrain and the limited visibility in the area of Casitta where, line walking was impossible; nonetheless, here walkers aimed to cover ground as systematically as possible. Tile was counted, weighed and discarded. All other artefacts were washed and catalogued.

2006 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the Balze/ Erraneria area, only sparse archaeological material was located during fieldwalking. The area sampled was inevitably small, but its archaeological potential appears to be limited by the unstable and modified land surface on the slopes; deep alluvium covers the valley bottom. There were also problems of access. However, brief inspection of the course of a new gas pipeline revealed plentiful (if decontextualised) archaeological material. Access to the presumed site of Orsi's 'villa' was not possible. No evidence of any other villa-type sites was located, though a large and well-endowed villa with marble, glass and plaster, etc. was located by the nearby Troina survey (Malone et al. 2001–3: 20). Across Sicily more generally, evidence is emerging that the villa at Piazza Armerina was not a unique phenomenon in the late imperial landscape (see Wilson 1990: 208–10); whether or not Orsi's 'villa' can contribute to this debate we cannot currently say.

Work on the lava flow demonstrated limited surface material, but abundant and complex standing structures mainly associated with pastoral exploitation. Some of these were mapped, but a full-scale survey was beyond the time and labour available this year. Preliminary mapping through remotely sensed data could be followed up with aerial photography and finally detailed GPS mapping. Shovel-pit testing and cleaning of the exposed sections could be used to identify the presence of (datable) archaeological material. Exploration of the area exposed by tomb-robbing activity in the Casitta area, revealed a comparatively dense scatter of material extending across an area of up to 10ha. Pottery collected in the area suggests continuous occupation from the prehistoric period to the third or second centuries BC; tile and remains of stone structures indicate a substantial and permanently-occupied 'village'.

The wall on S. Venera has been known for some time. However, earlier excavations have failed to recover any material with which to date its construction and/ or use (cleaning, mapping and analysis of the complex were carried out under the supervision of F. Privitera). The wall represents a substantial investment of labour, and in well-preserved sections demonstrates a significant level of monumentality. It has been suggested to be a defensive wall, though its line does not always make the best use of local topography for this purpose. Further objections might be raised by the impossibility of defending such a structure, both in terms of its length and its presumed (lack of) height. Alternatively, the wall has been suggested to be a boundary marker, however the presumed interior (to the north) shows no distinctive difference, for example in amounts of cultivable land, from the exterior. More sense can be made of the structure when its wider location is considered. If the impressive cliffs which mark the edge of lava flow to the north are considered to 'close' the circuit and form its northern and western sides, a distinct area is defined (c. 75ha). The 'enclosed' area overlooks the fertile hills to the north and hence sits on, and controls, the boundary between agricultural and pastoral resources. A Neolithic settlement occupies a similarly liminal position on the very edge of the lava flow to the immediate west. The location of the village at Casitta is perhaps more difficult to understand, lying more centrally within the lava flow, and hence distant from any agricultural land and sources of water, though it lies close to alluvial material which overlies the lava. Data collected in the first season are insufficient to propose any detailed interpretation, but this large settlement may be connected with the presence of a nearby (Hellenistic?) road. Material collected includes black glazed ware, suggesting contacts with the coastal areas (for a recent analysis on settlements and housing in Archaic Sicily, see Spatafora 2005).



Fig. 3 Hellenistic loomweight from the large settlement at Galatase

In the Galatase area, a dense carpet of material was identified extending at least 350m north-south by 250m east-west (8ha+; the full extent of the settlement could not be established during the 2006 season due to the limitations of time and resources). Variations in the density, type and date of material indicate that this site was occupied from the Greek era through to the Byzantine period (fig. 3). The surface collection indicates functional and chronological patterning. A major concentration of fine wares (black glazed ware) and miniatures of the fourth-second centuries BC, have been identified along the river Martello and may represent a specific cult focus or a rather rich settlement.

Large quantities of Hellenistic and early Roman pottery has also been identified, slightly further from the river. Here, the bulk of the material collected suggest the presence of agricultural processing and storage (amphorae, dolia and a fragment of a flour mill). Pottery recorded in this specific sector suggests late antique activity, dated to the fourth to sixth centuries AD, with evidence also for the medieval period, up to the eleventh and twelfth centuries (coins dated to the Constantinian and the early Norman period are believed to come from this area). Nearby, a funerary area (already partially identified and excavated by the Soprintendenza) dated to the fourth to sixth centuries AD has been identified. In connection with this funerary function, the survey

recovered a lead fragment with inscribed letters — elsewhere in Sicily, similar objects have been found in the areas of Chiaramonte Gulfi, Camarina and contrada Cifali. Some of them may have come from graves and have been dated from the third to sixth centuries AD (Cordano 1997–8: 293–7; Cracco Ruggini 1997–8: 259). The whole Galatese site appears to represent a major, long-term settlement focus, of possible urban status (fig. 4.).



Fig 4 Landscape view looking north towards the town of Maniace and the site of the large settlement at Galatese to the immediate left at the base of the hillslope

The identification of the exact site of the historically-attested urban settlement of Maniace (fortified Katouna Maniace: Uggeri 2006) remains vital to understanding the relationship between this Byzantine town and the monastery of Maniace (now incorporated into Nelson's Castle) as well as wider Byzantine territorial organization. Finally, a short distance south of the Galatese site, the presence of settlements dated between the Hellenistic and Augustan periods have been identified in the contrada Vaccheria.

The small area covered in this pilot season means that any conclusions must be highly tentative, but it is possible to note a series of preliminary observations. First, small scatters indicating dispersed settlement are comparatively rare. The results from Troina appear to indicate a more dispersed and 'busy' landscape — identifying 50 concentrations, including 13 Roman scatters, mainly on hilltops (Ayala & French 2005: 152; Malone et al. 2001–3: 11). However, the Troina survey did not identify any sites of the large dimensions found at Galatese and Casitta. Much higher densities of sites are reported from the coastal areas, for example at Himera (Belvedere et al. 2002) and Lentini (Valenti 1997–8: 248).

The investigation of the large settlement at Casitta and the discovery of the long-lived centre at Galatese may relate to the apparently low level of dispersed sites. The Galatese centre, in particular, was long-lived and settlement in this area may have been strongly nucleated (even urbanised). Medieval settlement in this area was concentrated into a few 'agro-towns' with

occasional dispersed farmsteads; this tradition may have particularly ancient roots. Comparison with the large (c. 8ha) 'agricultural centre' and road station at Philosophiana, 6km from Piazza Armerina, may be useful (Belvedere 1995). This site included a substantial bath house and material extending over 8ha. Like the centre at Galatese, the site was long-lived with evidence for Republican activity, but the bulk is of imperial period, with a particular concentration in the late imperial/ late antique period (see Wilson 1990: 224).

FUTURE WORK AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of the fieldwalking survey clearly demonstrate the potential of further study of this research area and provide important evidence for the planning of future work. In summary, two large settlements were identified. Smaller, 'isolated' rural sites were less obvious though this may reflect the relatively difficult preservation and recovery conditions. Work to date has therefore revealed the potential existence of either a primarily nucleated settlement pattern or a settlement hierarchy. Future work must therefore assess whether settlement was primarily nucleated or hierarchical and how this changed over time. The key to broader and longer-term interpretation lies in articulating the links between these different sites and landscapes.

Key strategies will include methodologies to address the specific conditions of the lava flow. For example, shovel pits in the pockets of soil could be used to assess the presence or absence of material culture. At Himera, the surfaces of some unploughed fields were turned over with picks in order to identify any ploughzone material (Belvedere et al. 2002: 12). Detailed mapping from remotely-sensed images could be used to establish a basic map of field walls and other structures, followed by a more detailed GPS survey and assessment of horizontal relationships.

Detailed terrain modelling will be essential. Work at nearby Troina to assess the instability of land surfaces and the impact on archaeological preservation and visibility is of particular relevance (Ayala & Fitzjohn 2002; Ayala & French 2005; Fitzjohn & Ayala this volume; for similar instability in the middle/ upper Valle dell' Imera, see Burgio 2002: 161–2). Studies of the geomorphology of the Saracena and other river channels will be important for understanding of the destruction and burial of archaeological deposits. Issues of flooding will also be critical, not least because of the historical reference to flooding as the cause of abandonment of medieval Maniace (Galati 1988). Interestingly, whilst Ayala & French (2005: 165) provisionally link phases of degradation (widespread hill disturbance) to extensive clearance associated with historically attested pastoralism at Troina, the evidence of the large settlement at Galatese demonstrates agricultural production of tree crops and grain on a considerable scale which may distinguish the settlement and economy of the Maniace area from the Troina area. Dating of phases of river incision and deposition, and of the lava flow, will also be important considerations. Geophysical survey of the Galatese site might provide useful evidence for the existence of large, possibly public structures. Other necessary work will include archive studies of medieval documents, particularly for Church properties and landholdings.

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